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ABSTRACT

It is argued that viewing learners' errors as evidence for the emergence of new varieties of the English language is dangerously mistaken, particularly where it leads to the abandonment of Standard English as a model for learners. It is shown how this view is mistaken by: (1) citing recent British thinking on the relationship of varieties of English to the standard language; and (2) by presenting a taxonomy of varieties of English that distinguishes between ethnopolitical and linguistic labels for varieties. It is further argued that to displace Standard English from the center of attention is to deny learners access to the wider world of international communication. (JL)

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II LANGUAGE VARIETIES AND STANDARD LANGUAGE

Randolph Quirk

Abstract

This paper is based on a lecture delivered at the JALT conference in 1988. In it I argue that viewing learners' errors as evidence for the emergence of new varieties of the English language is dangerously mistaken, particularly where it leads to the abandonment of Standard English as a model for learners. I show how this view is mistaken by (a) citing recent British thinking on the relationship of varieties of English to the standard language and (b) presenting a taxonomy of varieties of English which distinguishes for example between ethnopolitical and linguistic labels for varieties. I go on to argue that to displace Standard English from the centre of attention is to deny learners access to the wider world of international communication.

A short time ago, the Department of Education and Science in London published a very important document on the teaching of English. On the teaching of English, that is to say, in Britain (Kingman, 1988). I would like to invite you to consider to what extent---if any---this report has relevance for the teaching of English *outside* Britain: specifically, in countries such as Japan and Germany, Senegal and India---countries where English is not a native language.

But first a word on the report in its own British context. Why did our Secretary of State, Mr Kenneth Baker, decide to set up a distinguished committee of inquiry on this subject? And distinguished it most certainly was: fifteen men and women comprising eminent writers like Antonia Byatt, P J Kavanagh, journalists like Keith Waterhouse, linguists like Henry Widdowson and Gillian Brown; educators like Brian Cox; and there was the broadcaster Robert Robinson, the Oxford professor of poetry Peter Levi, the research industrialist Charles Suckling, the whole committee presided over by the mathematician Sir John Kingman. They were brought together from their diverse fields because the Secretary of State and many others in Britain have been dissatisfied with the teaching of English in British schools: dissatisfied with *what* is taught, *how* it is taught, and *the results* of the teaching as they show in the capabilities of school leavers.

The conclusions of the Kingman Committee strike most people as wholly sensible. It is the duty of British schools, says the report, "to enable children to acquire Standard English, which is their right" (p. 14)---a statement which may

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seem so obvious and unsurprising that the only *surprise* is why it needs to be stated. The very first page of the report explains: the committee found that teachers were distracted by the belief that children's capacity to use English effectively "can and should be fostered only by exposure to varieties of the English language". It is not of course that the committee deny the interest and importance of the variation within English---still less that such variation exists. They would agree, I am sure, that our ability to vary our language according to our social and regional backgrounds, our professional careers, and indeed our creative urges as individuals, is at the very heart of the gift that human language bestows. And this has been made clear in the final report of the follow-up working party chaired by Brian Cox (Cox, 1989). No, what they are saying is that the interest in varieties of English has got out of hand and has started blinding both teachers and taught to the central linguistic structure from which the varieties might be seen as varying.

This may well be true, but I think there is a more serious issue that I would like to address, and that is the profusion and (I believe) *confusion* of *types* of linguistic variety that are freely referred to in educational, linguistic, sociolinguistic, and literary critical discussion. Let me give some recent examples where the word *English* is preceded by an adjective or noun to designate a specific "variety":

American English
Legal English
Working-class English
Computer English
BBC English
Black English
South Asian English
Queensland Kanaka English
Liturgical English
Ashkenazic English
Scientific English
Chicago English
Chicano English

Some of these you'll have come across, others you may not, but it will take only a moment's reflection to convince you that---whether familiar or not--- these varieties are on desperately different taxonomic bases. For example, *legal English* refers to a style that may be used equally (and perhaps indistinguishably) in American English and British English. *Ashkenazic English* is a term which has been used to characterize the usage of Ashkenazi Jews in the United States, but whether it holds for Ashkenazim living in Britain or Australia or indeed Israel, I don't know. When Braj Kachru (1982) talks about *South Asian English*, he is referring to audible similarities in the way Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Sri Lankans speak English; but when E G Bokamba (1982) refers to *African English*, he seems not to be claiming linguistic similarities but only the common ground that the work so labelled was written in Africa by black Africans. Fernando Peñalosa (1980) applies the term *Chicano English* to the English used

by those of Mexican Spanish origin in the U.S.A and he contrasts it with *Anglo English*---not presumably a synonym for *American English* since it would doubtless exclude both the English of black Americans and perhaps equally the *Anglo English* of Britain. When Dell Hymes (1981) uses *Indian English*, it refers to the English not of India as Kachru uses it but to the English of Amerindians of whatever group in North America: Cherokees in Oklahoma, Hopis in Arizona, Navahos in Utah, and it is not clear to me whether the designation seeks to capture linguistic features held in common by such dispersed fragments of different groups from among the pre-European inhabitants.

In the preface to her recent study, *Norms of Language* (1987), Renate Bartsch says "I have written this book in...the German variety of English" (of which my wife, herself a German and a professor of linguistics in Heidelberg, was previously unaware, but which Professor Bartsch says is "a version of one of the many varieties of the supervariety International English").

Let me try to find a path through this maze of varieties and supervarieties by attempting a taxonomy (see Figure 1).

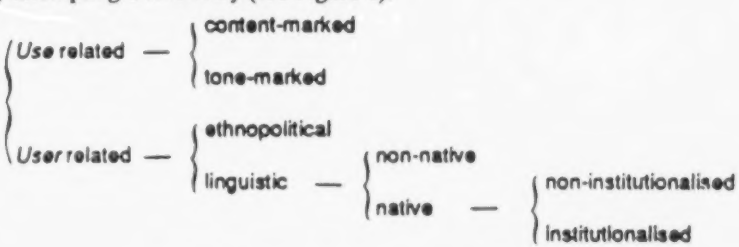

Figure 1. A Taxonomy of Varieties of English

The first distinction we need to make is between those varieties that are *use*-related and those that are *user*-related. The former concerns varieties that an individual assumes along with a relevant role: and a given individual may have a mastery of several such varieties. A woman who is a lawyer must express herself in *legal English* in drafting an agreement, in *tennis English* when she confesses that her friend beat her "in straight sets"; she may write articles for the Sunday Times in *literary English*, and her word-processor makes her feel the need to master a little *computer English*. (See further, Quirk and Stein, 1990, Chapter Four)

From such *use*-related varieties, we distinguish *user*-related varieties, where in general an individual is tied to one only: Americans, for example, express themselves only in *American English*, the British only in *British English*---and they sound phony if they try to switch between varieties. But two lawyers corresponding on a case across the Atlantic both switch into *legal English*, however much each colours his or her legal English with the user-related American or British variety of the language.

Within the user-related varieties, however, we must distinguish between varieties identified on ethnopolitical grounds and those identified on linguistic grounds. Only thus can I make sense of Bokamba's *African English* or Peñalosa's *Anglo English* or Dell Hymes's sense of *Indian English* (all of which seem to be concerned with ethnopolitical statements---in contrast with Kachru's sense of *Indian English* which plainly has a linguistic basis.)

This is an important distinction and it is one that should be confronted by those who speak about *Taiwanese English* and *Hong Kong English,* for example, since on linguistic grounds there are similarities that relate not to the political labels *Hong Kong* and *Taiwanese* but to the Chinese that is spoken in both areas. The distinction also reveals the ambiguity in the term *Chinese English* itself: English as used in the People's Republic *or* features of English influenced by a Chinese L1 (whether in China, Taiwan, Singapore, or Malaysia). One must seek analogous clarification about the variety called *Black English*: if it covers all the blacks in North America, any linguistic basis becomes rather broad; and if it is extended to include the English of blacks in Britain, a linguistic basis becomes almost incredible---especially since the term *Black* is assumed not only by Britons of Afro-Caribbean origin but equally by many who are of Pakistani and Indian origin as well.

Keeping to the linguistic branch from this node, we face another distinction: that between non-native varieties of English and native varieties, the former including long-recognised types like *Indian English* (in Kachru's sense), *Nigerian English, East African English,* and presumably "the German variety of English" in which Renate Bartsch says she wrote *Norms of Language.* Just as presumably, they include what I called ten years ago the *performance varieties* (cf. Quirk, 1981) by means of which one can sometimes recognise the ethnic background of a person by his or her English: *Russian English, French English, Japanese English.* The problem with varieties in this branch is that they are inherently unstable, ranged along a qualitative cline, with each speaker seeking to move to a point where the varietal characteristics reach vanishing point, and where thus, ironically, each variety is best manifest in those who by commonsense measures speak it worst. (cf. Quirk, 1988).

The other branch from this node is the native varieties---*American English, Australian English, British English, New Zealand English, South African English, New England English, Yorkshire English,* and so on. And within these we make our final distinction: between *non-institutionalised* varieties and those varieties that are *institutionalised* in the sense of being fully described and with defined standards observed by the institutions of state. Of the latter, there are two: *American English* and *British English*; and there are one or two others with standards rather informally established, notably *Australian English.* But most native varieties are not institutionalised and while sharing a notable stability as compared with non-native varieties, they resemble these to a slight extent in

being on a socioeconomic cline, such that the features marking an individual as being a speaker of Yorkshire English or New York English tend to disappear the higher up the socioeconomic scale he or she happens to be.

Now, of all the distinctions I've made, the one that seems to be of the greatest importance educationally and linguistically is that between native and non-native: it is the distinction that is probably also the most controversial. Indeed, I have made it the more controversial by implicitly excluding from the non-native branch a node which permits the *institutionalised-non-institutionalised* distinction to apply to them. I exclude the possibility only because I am not aware of there being any institutionalised non-native varieties, a point to which I shall return later. Let me just refer, however, to some recent psycholinguistic work by René Coppieters (1987) which strikingly underscores the *native/non-native* distinction. Coppieters worked with a group of about twenty native speakers of French and with a similar-sized group of non-native speakers---all of whom with a high level of performance, all of them resident in France for at least five years and using French as their working language. Indeed the mean residence level was 17 years and many of the group were believed by French people to be native speakers.

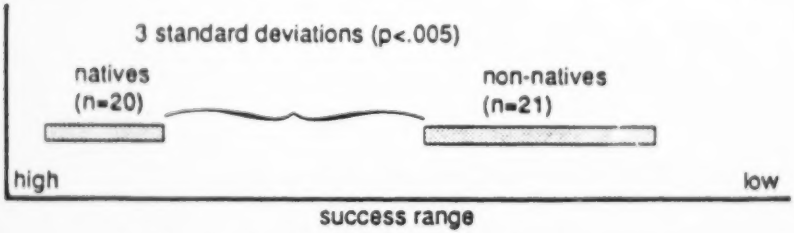

Figure 2. Native and non-native speakers' competence

Yet in a range of interesting and sophisticated elicitation tests, the success rate of the non-natives fell not merely *below* but *outside* the range of native success to a statistically significant degree ($p<.005$); see Figure 2. For example, in judging and exploring the semantics of paired sentences involving the imperfect tense and the passé composé, what we may call the 'failure' rate of the natives was 2%, that of the non-natives 41.5%. For example:

Il a soupçonné quelque chose, j'en suis sûr.
Il soupçonnait quelque chose, j'en suis sûr.

The difference in the sets of scores was reflected in the comments by the non-natives. Though they always managed to understand and make themselves understood fairly well through the linguistic and situational context, they said

repeatedly that they had developed no intuitions about the distinction between the imperfect and the passé composé: and two who said just this had worked in important professional positions in France for 15 and 21 years respectively.[1]

The implications for foreign language teaching are clear: the need for native teacher support and the need for non-native teachers to be in constant touch with the native language. And since the research suggests that natives have radically different internalisations, the implications for attempting the institutionalisation of non-native varieties of any language are too obvious for me to mention.

Instead, let me return to the broader issue of language varieties as it concerned the Kingman Committee, since they saw this as bound up with uncertain attitudes to *standards*, noting that some teachers of English believed "that any notion of correct or incorrect use of language is an affront to personal liberty".

It would take me too far from the subject of this lecture to examine why so many teachers should have turned away from concentrating on Standard English, from criticising a student's poor usage as incorrect, and should have preferred to explore the variety of language that students bring to their classrooms from very different social and regional backgrounds. Suffice it to say that the reasons have been idealistic, humanitarian, democratic and highly reputable, reasons which honourably motivated student teachers. And why not, indeed? If recent history has given us a "liberation theology", why not also a "liberation linguistics"? The trouble, as the Kingman Committee sees it, is that such an educational fashion went too far, grossly undervaluing the baby of Standard English while *over*valuing the undoubtedly important bathwater of regional, social and ethnic varieties: giving the impression that any kind of English was as good as any other, and that in denying this, nothing less was at stake than "personal liberty" itself. By contrast, the Kingman Report sees such an educational ethos as trapping students in their present social and ethnic sectors and as creating a barrier to their educational progress, their career prospects, their social and geographical mobility. Command of Standard English, says the Report, so far from inhibiting personal freedom, "is more likely to increase the freedom of the individual than diminish it" (Kingman, 1988, p 3).

Let me now turn from the fairly parochial issue of teaching English in Britain to the teaching of English in non-English speaking countries---where overwhelmingly greater numbers of students are involved. Most of the Kingman Report should surely have no bearing upon *them*. Since students in the Soviet Union or Japan bring little English of their own to the classroom, there can be no question of the teacher performing his or her task by merely exposing them to the "varieties of English language" around them. They come to learn a totally unfamiliar language, so there can be no question of the teacher rejecting the "notion of correct or incorrect" use of English. And all the students know

perfectly well that, as Kingman says, their command of Standard English is likely to increase their freedom and their career prospects. So of course they---teachers and taught alike---accept the basic conclusion that it is the institution's duty to teach Standard English.

At any rate, that is what one would *expect* to be the position with teaching English as a foreign language, and it is the position that is assumed by most foreign ministries of education and by most foreign students---and their parents.

But the contrast between teaching English to English boys and girls in Leeds and teaching English to Japanese boys and girls in Kobe is not as neat and absolute as I have made it seem. Some schools in London and New York, for instance, have so many pupils from a non-English speaking background that the techniques and approaches of teaching English as a foreign language have to be adopted---in precisely the same schools and often by the same teachers as those where the ideals of what I've called "liberation linguistics" are still enthusiastically served up, however much they are just stale leftovers from the 1960s.

Let me give you a New York example. A well-respected educationist wrote an article a year or so ago on the teaching of English to the many thousands of New York children who come from Spanish-speaking homes (Goldstein, 1987). These children, she said, identify far more with the black children in the streets around them than with white children, and for that reason the English they should be taught is not Standard English but what she calls Black English. This is the English that will help them to relate to their peers outside the classroom; and after all, she pointed out, a sentence like "I don't have none" shows "a correct use of Black English negation"(p 432). Now, that article was published in one of the best known international journals, read by teachers of English not only in the United States but in Italy, Greece, China, and Japan---by the most professionally-minded, in fact, of English language teachers throughout the world. The context in which the article was *written* of course is clear enough, but what about attempts to adapt its message in the very different contexts in which it is *read*?

We must not forget that many Japanese teachers, Malaysian teachers, Indian teachers have done postgraduate training in Britain and the United States, eager to absorb what they felt were the latest ideas in English teaching. Where better, after all, to get the latest ideas on this than in the leading English-speaking countries? The interest in "varieties of English language", called in question on the first page of the Kingman report, has in fact been widely stimulated, as we know from university theses being written in a whole host of countries: with titles like *Malaysian English, Filipino English, Hong Kong English, Nigerian English, Indian English.*

The countries last mentioned here, of course, are chiefly those where English has had an *internal* role over a long period for historical reasons. English was indeed the language used by men like Gandhi and Nehru in the movement to liberate India from the British raj and it is not surprising that "liberation linguistics" should have a very special place in relation to such countries. Put at its simplest, the argument is this: many Indians speak English; one can often guess that a person is Indian from the way he or she speaks English; India is a free and independent country as Britain is or as America is. Therefore, just as there is an *American English* (as recorded, for example, in the Webster Collegiate Dictionary), and a *British English* (as recorded, for example, in the Concise Oxford), so there is an *Indian English* on precisely the same equal footing (and of course a *Nigerian English*, a *Ghanaian English, a Singaporean English, a Filipino English*, etc).

No one would quarrel with any of this provided there was agreement within each such country that it was *true*, or even that there was a determined policy to make it true. So far as I can see, neither of these conditions obtains, and most of those with authority in education and the media in these countries tend to protest that the so-called national variety of English is an attempt to justify inability to acquire what they persist in seeing as 'real' English. A colleague of mine who this year spent some time working in Kenya told me in a letter: "There is heated debate here as to whether there is such a thing as 'East African English' or whether the local variety is just the result of the increasing failure of the education system." In his book on English in Nigeria, O Kujore (1985) says that although earlier observers have talked freely of *Standard Nigerian English*, the fact is "that any such standard is, at best, in process of evolution".[2] It is reported that, not long before her death, Mrs Indira Gandhi returned rather angry from an international conference---angry because she had been unable to understand the English used there by a fellow-Indian delegate. She demanded that her Ministry of Education do something about standards of English. Within India itself, the status of *Indian English* is the more difficult to establish in that, among the few organisations using the term officially, the Indian Academy of Literature applies it in a purely ethnopolitical sense to literary work in English written by ethnic Indians.

No one should underestimate the problem of teaching English in such countries as India and Nigeria, where the English of the teachers themselves inevitably bears the stamp of locally acquired deviation from the standard language ("You are knowing my father, isn't it?"). The temptation is great to accept the situation and even to justify it in euphemistically sociolinguistic terms. A few months ago, discussing these matters in the Philippines, I heard a British educational consultant who had worked for a year or so in Manila tell Filipino teachers that there was no reason for them to correct the English of their students if it seemed comprehensible to other Filipinos. Whether the listening

teachers felt relieved or insulted I don't know, but of one thing I was sure: the advice was bad. Filipinos, like Indians, Nigerians, Malaysians, are learning English not just to speak with their own country folk but to link themselves with the wider English-using community throughout the world. It is neither liberal nor liberating to permit learners to settle for lower standards than the best, and it is a travesty of liberalism to tolerate low standards which will lock the least fortunate into the least rewarding careers.

When we turn from the special problems of countries like India and the Philippines to countries like Spain and Japan which have little or no legacy of localised English on the streets, in offices, or in markets, we would surely expect to find no such conflicts about teaching Standard English. And so it is for the most part, no doubt. But not entirely. Ill-considered reflexes of liberation linguistics and a preoccupation with what the Kingman Report calls 'exposure to varieties of English language' intrude even here. And this in two respects.

First, the buoyant demand for native-speaking English teachers means that one occasionally finds, in Tokyo or Madrid, young men and women teaching English with only a minimal teacher training, indeed with little specialised education: they're employed because, through accident of birth in Leeds or Los Angeles, they are native speakers of English. Not merely may their own English be far from standard but they may have little respect for it and may well have absorbed (at second or third hand) the linguistic ethos that is simplified into the tenet that any English is as good as any other.

One such young Englishman approached me after a lecture I'd given in Madrid a few months ago. Why, he asked, had I distinguished between the nouns *message* and *information* as countable and uncountable? His students often wrote phrases like *several informations* and since he understood what was meant, how could they be wrong? In some wonderment that I was actually talking to a British teacher of English, I gently explained about Standard English being the norm by which we taught and made judgments. He flatly disagreed and went on to claim that he could not bring himself to correct a Spanish pupil for using a form that had currency in an English dialect---*any* English dialect. "She catched a cold" is as good as "She caught a cold", he ended triumphantly and strode away.

Let's hope that such half-baked quackery is rare because the *other* respect in which 'exposure to varieties' is ill-used is not all that rare, I fear. This is where academic linguists from Britain or America, sometimes with little experience of foreign language teaching, are invited to advise on teaching English abroad. If by training or personal interest they share the language ethos that the Kingman Report criticises, their advice---merely a bit controversial in its original British or American educational context---is likely to be flagrantly misleading when exported with minimal adaptation to, say, Japan. Indeed, it can even happen with consultants who have years of hands-on ELT experience.

An example. A year or so ago, the Japan Association of Language Teachers invited a British educationist to address their annual convention. I learned about this from a worried Japanese official who drew my attention to the text of this British expert's address published in Tokyo.[3] It warned teachers not to make "overly hasty judgements about the language performance of learners", and particular emphasis was given by the expert to the following statement: "Language behaviour which at first sight appears to be flawed may in fact be a manifestation of a new---though as yet unrecognised---variety of English." (Coleman, 1987, p. 13)

The implications of this, if hard-working Japanese teachers took him seriously, are quite horrendous. Students, 'liberally' permitted to think their 'new variety' of English was acceptable, would be defenceless before the harsher but more realistic judgment of those with authority to employ or promote them. They have in effect been denied the command of Standard English which, to quote the Kingman Report yet again, "is more likely to increase the freedom of the individual than diminish it" (p 3).

Certainly, if I were a foreign student paying good money in Tokyo or Madrid to be taught English, I would feel cheated by such a tolerant pluralism. My goal would be to acquire English precisely because of its power as an instrument of international communication. I would be annoyed at the equivocation over English since it seemed to be unparalleled in the teaching of French, German, Russian, or Chinese.

I would be particularly annoyed at irrelevant emphasis on the different varieties of English when I came to realise they mattered so little to native speakers of English---to those who effortlessly read the novels of Saul Bellow, Iris Murdoch, and Patrick White, perceiving no linguistic frontier to match the passports (American, British and Australian) of these writers. And when I came to realise that the best grammars and dictionaries similarly related to a Standard English that was freely current throughout the world.

Indeed, the widespread approval of the Kingman Report confirms that the mass of ordinary native-English speakers have never lost their respect for Standard English, and it needs to be understood abroad too (cf Hao, 1988; Yashiro, 1988) that Standard English is alive and well, its existence and its value alike clearly recognised. This needs to be understood in foreign capitals, by education ministries, and media authorities: and understood too by those from the UK and the U.S.A who teach English abroad.

Of course, it is not easy to eradicate once-fashionable educational theories, but the effort is worthwhile for those of us who believe that the world needs an international language and that English is the best candidate at present on offer. Moreover, the need to make the effort is something for which we must bear a certain responsibility---and in which we have a certain interest.

Notes

. It would be interesting to see similar controlled experiments for English with such pairs as "The spacecraft is now 1000 km from [± the] earth", "She [± has] lived there for three years."

2. Similar doubts about Filipino English have recently been expressed in *English Today* (16, 1988) and they confirm my own observations in Manila.

3. I was also asked about the *Four Seasons Composition Book* (Pereira and O'Reilley, 1988) in which Japanese students are told that "if you can make yourself understood...that is good enough" since their attempts constitute "a respectable variety of English".

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